# New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 14 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of September 14, 1953

## 1953 PRODUCTIONS
### Premieres in Other Years

*Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes*

1952 Vol.


| *Stage Play* | *Page* |
|---|---|
| Bernardine | 231 |
| Children's Hour (The) | 151 |
| Deep Blue Sea (The) | 207 |
| *Dial M for Murder | 215 |
| Evening with Beatrice Lillie (An) | 254 |
| Male Animal (The) | 297 |
| Mrs. McThing | 359 |
| My Darlin' Aida | 218 |
| New Faces of 1952 | 278 |
| Pal Joey | 398 |
| *Seven Year Itch (The) | 186 |
| Time of the Cuckoo (The) | 235 |
| Time Out for Ginger | 177 |
| Two's Company | 157 |
| Whistler's Grandmother | 160 |
| *Wish You Were Here | 266 |


1951 Vol.


| | |
|---|---|
| Fourposter (The) | 190 |
| *King and I (The) | 304 |
| Moon Is Blue (The) | 322 |


1950 Vol.


| | |
|---|---|
| *Guys and Dolls | 185 |


1949 Vol.


| | |
|---|---|
| *South Pacific | 312 |


**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 14, 1953*

## 1953 PRODUCTIONS
### Premieres During 1953

*Reviews Appear in This Volume*


| *Stage Play* | *Page* |
|---|---|
| *Anna Russell and Her Little Show | 289 |
| Bat (The) | 390 |
| Be Your Age | 397 |
| Bleak House | 315 |
| Camino Real | 330 |
| *Can-Can | 304 |
| Carnival in Flanders | 286 |
| Crucible (The) | 383 |
| Date With April (A) | 318 |
| Emperor's Clothes (The) | 368 |
| *Fifth Season (The) | 380 |
| *Hazel Flagg | 362 |
| Horses in Midstream | 325 |
| John Brown's Body | 358 |
| Love of Four Colonels (The) | 394 |
| Love's Labour's Lost | 372 |
| Maggie | 351 |
| *Me and Juliet | 298 |
| Men of Distinction | 307 |
| Merchant of Venice (The) | 340 |
| Mid-Summer | 386 |
| Misalliance | 354 |
| *My 3 Angels | 334 |
| *Oklahoma! | 294 |
| On Borrowed Time | 365 |
| *Picnic | 348 |
| Pink Elephant (The) | 312 |
| *Porgy and Bess | 337 |
| Room Service | 322 |
| Touchstone | 375 |
| *Wonderful Town | 344 |
| CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD | 320 |


***Theatre Openings***
"Anna Russell and Her Little Show"
"Carnival in Flanders"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of September 14, 1953*

*Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.*

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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# "Carnival in Flanders"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 9, 1953

## 'Carnival in Flanders' Opens Run

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Some years ago there was brought here a brilliant French film called "Carnival in Flanders," witty, dry, sophisticated and memorable.

A lot of time and talent and incalculable sums of money have been devoted to deriving from that picture a great big clumsy, incoherent musical. There are flashes of excitement through it, but only flashes. Most of them are in the dancing, scenery and costumes.

The book sounds like a review of the most familiar jokes ever told. Its mood changes without rhyme or reason. The style of the performers is just as subject to alteration. The result is confusing when it is not just plain boring.

**17th Century Tale.**

It is the story of a town in 17th Century Flanders, which is visited by a plundering horde of Spanish soldiers. The mayor pretends to be freshly dead, by way of distracting the invaders. His wife finds a much sounder, if more amorous, method of placating the visitors.

There are periods in the evening when the whole thing begins to resemble a concert by Dolores Gray. As the mayor's wife, she is ever in evidence. Clearly whenever anyone was at a loss; the solution was to give Miss Gray another song. She does duets, production numbers, solos, and winds up with a one-woman cantata not unlike the "Soliloquy" her co-star, John Raitt, once sang in "Carousel."

Miss Gray can deliver a song with the best, but she has not the tonal quality nor the dramatic resource to entertain quite so constantly.

**Little to Do.**

Mr. Raitt does not appear until the show has gone on for over an hour, and then has not much to do. He does deliver two or three ringing high notes, which won hysterical applause, despite the fact that the songs were anything but distinguished.

Roy Roberts labors with the best of will as the mayor, but it is a thankless role, because the comedy entirely lacks original touches.

Oliver Smith has designed some striking scenery, and Lucinda Ballard has provided some equally startling costumes.

Helen Tamiris inflates the performance with excitement in a brutal and violent ballet depicting what the timid mayor expects the Spanish soldiers to do. In a huge and demoniac carnival toward the end, a trio of Matt Mattox, George Martin and Jimmy Alex got the evening's most spontaneous outburst, dancing Miss Tamiris' sharp adaptation of some swift Spanish figures.

I like Mr. Van Heusen's score at its simplest, and prefer of all his songs the catchy "One of Your Admirers."

**"CARNIVAL IN FLANDERS"**

Musical comedy based on the film "La Kernesse Heroique" by Charles Spaak, Jacques Feyder and Bernard Zimmer; book by Preston Sturges; lyrics by Johnny Burke; music by James Van Heusen; staged by Mr. Sturges; carnival ballet and musical numbers staged by Helen Tamiris; scenery by Oliver Smith; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; presented by Paula Stone, Michael Sloane and the Messrs. Burke and Van Heusen at the Century Theatre, September 8, 1953. The cast:

Siska.....Pat Stanley
Jan Breughel.....Kevin Scott
Tailor.....Paul Reed
Butcher.....Paul Lipson
Barber.....Bobby Vail
Innkeeper.....Lee Goodman
Mayor.....Roy Roberts
Cornelia.....Dolores Gray
Martha.....Dolores Kempner
Courier.....Matt Mattox
Three Mourning Women.....
Sandra Devin, Julie Marlowe, and Lorna Del Maestro
1st Officer.....Ray Mason
2d Officer.....George Martin
3d Officer.....Jimmy Alex
Duke.....John Raitt
1st Citizen.....Wesley Swails
2d Citizen.....Norman Weise
Lisa.....Jean Bradley
Katherine.....Undine Forrest
Orderly.....William Noble

Daily Mirror

September 9, 1953

## 'Carnival in Flanders' Is A Lavish Extravaganza

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Paula Stone and Mike Sloane teamed with Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen to bring "Carnival in Flanders" to the Century Theatre last evening. Based on a successful French art film called "La Kermesse Heroique," it has everything but a clever book and a first-rate score.

It will go down in the records as one of the most opulent and lavish extravaganzas ever to hit Broadway. The settings by Oliver Smith, under the influence of Breughel, and the costumes by Lucinda Ballard are magnificent. The ballets by Helen Tamiris are exciting and arresting. We liked particularly the thrilling "Plundering of the Town."

**IT IS AMAZING** that the gifted Preston Sturges, who has given us such sparkling theatre and movie fare in the past, could have penned such a pedestrian libretto. It has to do with the Mayor of a Flemish town, circa 1616, who feigns death to thwart a Spanish conqueror. His attractive wife attempts to improve upon the ruse, only to find herself, like Monna Vanna, fancying the gallant commander of the invaders.

**This is the sort of plot that demands wit and imagination. The dialogue must scintillate. It must state but never overstate. It must skate on thin ice but never break it with dull thuds. It must present a viewpoint amusingly. Sturges just hasn't brought it off.**

We preferred Burke's lyrics to Van Heusen's music. Though not exactly gems, the Burke words were often pleasantly to the point. Van Heusen's tunes were too much alike in mood. They lacked variety. Now, don't get us wrong. Several of the chansons will probably make the Hit Parade, but in toto they don't add up to a suitable score for so ambitious a song-and-dancer.

**THE PRODUCERS** have aided their cause immensely by casting Dolores Gray as the Mayor's fetching wife and John Raitt as the dashing, unscrupulous Duke. Miss Gray is a good-looking blonde with a wonderful voice that she uses effortlessly, with unerring skill and telling effect.

**There's no doubt about it, she's one of our brightest new stars. She can take over a limping vehicle and make it seem ever so much better than it is. She can inspire her associates to super-human heights. She deserves to have her name in huge marquee lights.**

Raitt, handsome, dynamic and ingratiating, is an ideal partner for Miss Gray. They act and sing the blazes out of their material. They both scored personal triumphs last night. They took many merited bows.

**ROY ROBERTS**, a really solid actor, is bogged down as the hapless Mayor. So capable a performer deserved better from scripter Sturges. We should also like to see young Pat Stanley and Kevin Scott under happier circumstances.

**"Carnival in Flanders" is a lovely musical to look at. It's just too bad it doesn't fall as felicitously on the ears as it does on the eyes. It has so much to recommend it that we regret it hasn't enough. But, after all, the holiday spirit cries for humor. And the new arrival doesn't have it.**

Journal American

September 9, 1953

# New Musical Lays Large Leaden Egg

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT is always a distressing experience to attend the opening of a theatrical venture fostered and performed by nice people, presented under the most friendly auspices, which still manages to lay a large leaden egg. But that, unfortunately, is what happened at the Century Theatre last night when Paula Stone and Mike Sloane offered Dolores Gray and John Raitt in a big new musical called "Carnival in Flanders."

This is a true tragedy all along the line because so much is creditable. Nobody but Ethel Merman can sing a song with more authority than Miss Gray, and she halted the proceedings a couple of times when the material was worthy of her talents. John Raitt has a compelling personality and a brilliant voice and he, too, managed a few brief triumphs on his own.

## Delightful Ballet

There were equally estimable efforts by Lucinda Ballard, who turned out a dazzling set of costumes; and Helen Tamaris, who ran up a delightful second-act ballet, and the music of Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen was always good, sometimes great.

But the overall result was stifled by a dreary and purposeless book. A town in Flanders in the year 1616 is about to be overrun by the invading Spanish, and the people agree their best hope lies in pretending the mayor of the town is dead and the women are hence all in mourning.

This supplies the background for scenes in which John Raitt, the Spanish Duke, makes love to the "widow," Dolores Gray; and all the other nonsense—as old as Aristophanes—revolving around a guy who is supposed to be dead, but ain't.

There is the scene where the "corpse" doesn't arrive at the bier on time, and a mix-up with a series of well-intentioned stand-ins. Then of course the corpse snores when the lover walks through the room. In the end it is difficult to tell who is kidding whom—and who cares?

## 'Rainy Day' Hit

Despite this obvious absence of humor there are moments of eminence. There is Dolores Gray singing "A Fine Old Institution," a paean in praise of marriage, and a superb bit called "Rainy Day," which has almost nothing to do with the story but is a hunk of ballad she can eat on the rest of her life, show or no show.

And there's a proper medium for Mr. Raitt's voice and the old "Student Prince" type delivery, a number named "Take the Word of a Gentleman."

But this isn't enough. There is no acceptable comedian in the cast and no large laughs; the story lacks ingenuity and cohesion. It is all very big and lavish and most becoming, but it's a bore.

DAILY NEWS

September 9, 1953

# 'Carnival in Flanders' a Gorgeous Musical, but the Plot Flounders

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Being as innocent of the painting art as D. D. Eisenhower, W. S. Churchill or the late Heywood Broun (who painted only Early Brouns), I can't discourse upon the early Seventeenth Century Flemish influence to be observed in last night's new musical at the Century Theatre, "Carnival in Flanders." But I can assure you that this show is a beautiful thing to see. And a rather difficult one to follow.

When the curtain goes up it reveals the first of many splendid scenes in Flacksenburg, Flanders, in the year 1616. A boy named Jan Breughel says he is in love with a girl named Siska and Siska returns the compliment. Jan tells Siska—a boy has to promise a girl that he is going to support her somehow—that he wants to be a painter like his father Pieter.

From here on, Preston Sturges, the author of the plot of "Carnival in Flanders," becomes frugal with Breughel and we never see the boy again until the last moments of the show, when he gets the girl. In the mean time, and it is quite a long mean time, three other artists fortunately are allowed to take over the production. They are Oliver Smith, scene designer; Lucinda Ballard, costumer, and Helen Tamiris, choreographer—and they are no less than wonderful.

**Pictorially Splendid.**

Any time Smith, Ballard or Tamiris has charge of the stage at the Century, "Carnival in Flanders" is a jewel of beauty, color and movement. But when bookwriter Sturges surges forth, Flanders flounders. The story of Jan and Siska, which might have been a nice one, is lost before it has begun, and the plot becomes enormously involved in the invasion of a happy Flemish town by a posse of Velasquez Spaniards.

The plot is, indeed, too tiresome to be chronicled here, but it does serve to introduce three first-class performers. One is Dolores Gray, a fine singer of songs who emphasizes every syllable of a lyric as clearly as she emphasizes every turn of a classy chassis. Miss Gray plays the wife of the mayor of this town in Flanders where they finally have the carnival in the second act.

**Fine Dance Trio.**

Another of the excellent trio is John Raitt, head man of the Spanish conquistadors. Raitt is a splendid singer of songs and a big and handsome fellow. Naturally he goes for Miss Gray, but he it too much of a gentleman of Castile to steal her from her husband. And this brings up the third of the principal performers, Roy Roberts, who is the mayor of this town we were talking about and the husband of Miss Gray. Roberts plays with skill and charm a thankless role which is not as funny as it is meant to be.

The high spots of "Carnival in Flanders" are a couple of festive dance numbers staged by Miss Tamiris, and the show-stopper is a pas-de-trois by Matt Mattox, George Martin and Jimmy Alex, who impersonate three invading Spaniards. This is fine work—and nobody stamps on the floor even once, which is a record for Spanish dancing.

Sturges has staged this expensive musical with a discerning eye for grouping and movement. But I don't figure that the lyrics by Johnny Burke and the music by James van Heusen amount to much; all evening long I expected Miss Gray or Mr. Raitt to get to a chorus, but all I ever heard was verses. Maybe they didn't have any choruses in Flacksenburg, Flanders, in 1616.

**The New York Times**

September 9, 1953

***Dolores Gray and John Raitt in 'Carnival in Flanders' at the New Century***

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Some day something will have to be done about rescuing Dolores Gray from mediocrity. At the moment she is gallantly beating her way through "Carnival in Flanders," which opened at the New Century last evening. She is an intelligent, thoroughly accomplished professional with an agreeable voice that has a lot of resonance and she takes an old-fashioned interest in singing lyrics clearly.

As an actress, she is authoritative enough to bring down the house with some of the maudlin songs James Van Heusen and Johnny Burke have flung together for the current ruckus. Having fought a gallant uphill tussle in "Two on the Aisle" and now having imparted some moments of glamour to "Carnival in Flanders," Miss Gray is entitled to a part that can help her instead of the other way round. She should not be expected to supply first aid to patients that are gasping.

* * *

If John Raitt had not had a good part in "Carousel" he, too, would be entitled to special consideration. For he has one of the finest baritone voices in the business, and he can sing like a thoroughbred. In "Carnival in Flanders" he also brings the house down with a stupid song that becomes an excellent imitation of music by the time he is through with it. Although Mr. Raitt has had one good part in the last decade, he has also applied his talents to "Magdalena" and "Three Wishes for Jamie," and now to "Carnival in Flanders." He is entitled to be in something that a theatregoer can enjoy.

According to the program, "Carnival in Flanders" is based on a French motion picture, "La Kermesse Heroique," which was apparently very gay and gallic many a long day ago. In the version prepared for the stage by Preston Sturges, it is laborious and banal today. It is as roguish about romance as third-rate operetta used to be in the treacle days after the first World War.

* * *

The sly and coquettish wife of a pompous fool, the dashing romantic duke at the head of a fierce Spanish army, the feeble-minded clowns, the susceptible wives, the torrid soldiers—it's pretty depressing to meet all these old ghosts again speaking clichés with the usual obsolete manners and taking part in songs that seem to have been written on a mimeograph machine.

As usual, the theatre has lavished a lot of wealth and talent on this hokum. Lucinda Ballard has dressed everybody to the nines in flowing and picturesque costume. Although Oliver Smith's scenery is cluttered and rather desperate, there is certainly a lot of it.

* * *

Faced with the problem of inventing ballets that might relieve the tedium, Helen Tamiris has seized upon a modernistic style that seems strange and irrelevant. But some of the ballets have considerable merit in their own right. And most of them include some brilliant dancing by Matt Mattox—lean, sharp, autere, satanic and swell. Having appeared in "Magdalena" and "Three Wishes for Jamie," Mr. Mattox is also due for a reprieve and a chance to work in something that counts.

But Miss Gray is the worthiest of the displaced persons in "Carnival in Flanders." Apart from her attractive personality and her gifts as a singer, she is a professional trouper. She knows how to handle songs, situations and dialogue so that they count theatrically. Give the woman a noble decoration. Or better: give her a part in a show.

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NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

September 9, 1953

THEATER

# 'Carnival In Flanders'

By WALTER F. KERR

A LOT of the intended comedy in "Carnival in Flanders" has to do with the problem of placing a floral wreath on a corpse. Let me place mine here now.

The new musical at the Century is an expensive display garlanded with all sorts of potential values. It has some luscious costumes from the hand of Lucinda Ballard. It has several flashes of driving dance devised by Helen Tamiris. It has the superb and thoroughly justified assurance of Dolores Gray. It has an exceptionally exciting dancer in Matt Mattox, and a very handy baritone in John Raitt. And it is a joyless exhibit from the word go.

Adapted from one of those French film classics of twenty years ago, "La Kermesse Heroique," the show's book is currently attributed to Preston Sturges. It seems that a good many collaborators have come and gone during the production's tryout stands on the road, and it is impossible to say how much Mr. Sturges has had to do with draining the wit, the buoyance, and the droll asperity from the original. But drained it has been. The fable of the Flanders women who stopped a Spanish invasion by highly unorthodox means has become a scattered, lumbering, and dispirited bore, the sort of show which can only get its first-act curtain down by firing a cannon some ten or twelve times directly at the audience.

* * *

In place of dry and knowing characterization, we are offered dialogue like "I was married before you were born—several months before," or, to jostle with the lower comics, "He's arriving with his court, his suite, and his escort," "Oh, he's even bringing his girl friend!" I hasten to add that this last is a pun on suite, pronounced 'sweetie.'

The score, by James Van Heusen and Johnny Burke, isn't really much help. The numbers sound agreeable enough, one by one. But they don't come one by one. They pile up on one another with a deadening similarity of structure and lyrical device, and even the infinitely resourceful Dolores Gray is hard put to keep you from thinking that she's doing an endless series of reprises.

Miss Gray is, however, a remarkable performer. She has enormous vocal power, released with an absolute minimum of apparent effort. Her command of the stage is both graceful and firm. She raises her head, sets her shoulders lightly, and lets a honey-toned voice flow as freely as though it were inexhaustible. Given any sort of chance, she can be funny, too. She does a brief bit in which she sets out to mesmerize her husband very amusingly; and even when her face is covered with a widow's veil she manages to convey rather more than the dialogue ever does. Though the evening is clearly coming down about her ears, she strides through it all with aplomb. Nothing is going to deflect her own responsible performance, and she is still able, along about 10 o'clock, to build a lament called "Rainy Day" into a show-stopper—or as close to a show-stopper as "Carnival in Flanders" ever gets.

* * *

Matt Mattox, assisted by George Martin and Jimmy Alex, pours fire into a second-act Spanish trio which is the highlight of Miss Tamiris' share of the choreography. He is also a striking figure as the Courier in an earlier and shatteringly vigorous showpiece called "The Plundering of the Town."

Though there is no program credit to say so, I am informed that this last is the invention of Jack Cole; it is one of the show's brightest assets. Against a smoky red Oliver Smith backdrop—the balance of Mr. Smith's work is routine and rather old-fashioned—and with the assistance of some stinging music from Roger Adams, the ballet company explodes into a bizarre vision of what is likely to happen in Flanders once the Spaniards arrive. In its emphatic and fairly sober effects, the dance may seem to go against the grain of an impish musical; but a lot of numbers might profitably have gone against the grain of this one.

* * *

John Raitt displays a set of dazzling teeth, manages himself competently in the amorous undertakings of an invading Duke, and ultimately covers himself with such glory as is going around in his robust treatment of a song called "Take the Word of a Gentleman."

Pat Stanley and Kevin Scott are pretty much lost in the frantic juvenile-ingenue roles, and there are quite a few subsidiary comedians—more or less indistinguishable from one another—rushing around in nightgowns.

The action of the piece is located in 1616, and so, I'm afraid, are the jokes.

New York Post
**HOME NEWS**
September 9, 1953

**By Richard Watts Jr.**

## Dolores Gray and the Spaniards

Since "La Kermesse Heroique" seemed comic, satirical and original when the French made it as a movie some years ago, it is odd that the book for "Carnival in Flanders," which Hollywood's talented Preston Sturges based on the same story, should appear so flat and heavy-handed. Yet, although a lot of splendid talents have gone into its expensive manufacture, the elaborate musical comedy based on the celebrated Gallic film had so much trouble with its ponderous narrative at the Century Theater last night that its incidental merits appeared seriously swamped.

There is no doubt about the excellence of those talents, either. "Carnival in Flanders" has a handsome and colorful production, with attractive sets by Oliver Smith and beautiful costumes by Lucinda Ballard, and there are two vivid and picturesque dance numbers, which Helen Tamaris has staged with imagination and a dramatic sense. The music didn't strike me as particularly impressive or original, but it does make for lively singing, and since Dolores Gray is fortunately present, the songs can grow actually exciting.

**Dolores Gray**

As for Miss Gray, I don't think anyone can doubt that she is a wonderful girl, with great skill and excitement about her, and that we were all correct when we cheered for her in a revue called "Two on the Aisle" a few seasons ago. Few people in the modern theater have been able to put over a number so thrillingly. You can understand every word of the lyrics she sings, which is more than some of her songs deserve, and she has the ability to make the commonplace in music seem vivid, arresting and memorable. The debt "Carnival in Flanders" and all of us owe Miss Gray is not easily to be repaid.

Nevertheless, despite the brilliance of Dolores Gray and the colorfulness of the production and the ballets, "Carnival in Flanders" emerges as strangely ponderous and lacking in festivity. For Mr. Sturges' book is not only humorless but gets in the way. Its tale of how the 17th century Spanish invaders of Flanders spared the town of Flacksenburg, when the sprightly young wife of the pompous mayor spent the night with their dashing officer, makes a determined effort to be both funny and romantic, but I thought it had little success in either direction.

**Words and Music**

With Dolores Gray singing them, songs don't have to be sensational to sound effective, and it seemed to me that James Van Heusen's music was reasonably agreeable, if fairly routine. Johnny Burke's lyrics are sometimes a trifle complicated in their striving for sophisticated humor. In some strange way, they often sounded to me like a not-altogether-successful effort to capture the quality of Frank Loesser's lyrics for "Guys and Dolls." Anyway, "Carnival in Flanders" is considerably better when it sings than when it stops to talk.

The romantic Spanish officer is played by John Raitt, who has a fine voice but is perhaps inclined to throw masculinity and the flash of teeth about a trifle self-consciously. Roy Roberts, who is returning to the stage after a long absence in Hollywood, is bogged down in the dull role of the pompous mayor, and the other actors have little to do. The dancers are excellent, particularly Matt Mattox, George Martin and Jimmy Alex as three terpsichorean Spanish soldiers. But it is Miss Gray who is the treasured member of "Carnival in Flanders."

# "Anna Russell and Her Little Show"

DAILY NEWS
September 8, 1953

## Anna Russell Starts New Season With a Funny One-Woman Show

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Because it was the dusky part of Labor Day, last evening by tradition marked the beginning of a new New York theatre season. Outside the Vanderbilt Theatre on 48th St. it was pleasant weatherwise, and inside it was pleasant, too. The entertainment within was called "Anna Russell and Her Little Show."

Anna Russell is not unknown to the patrons of Town Hall, where anything can happen once, but until last evening she was unknown to Broadway. The first first-nighters of the season discovered and gave a friendly greeting to a comedienne of unusual gifts—a singer who combines the pointed and delicate art of satire with the broad and lusty art of burlesque.

**"Carmen" Falls Apart.**

Since I first blundered into one of her Town Hall concerts I have been a devotee of Miss Russell's, and there was no lessening of my devotion last evening. She is a really entertaining performer—and a most durable one. Perhaps she is too durable, for she was on too long without a break in the first act of her "little show."

Like her countrywoman, Beatrice Lillie, Miss Russell can make the most serious things sound ridiculous. She can take any kind of song, from grand opera to music-hall, and make it delightfully absurd—and her satires and burlesques are all the better because she sings well in a number of voices and is a truly intelligent musician.

**Added Attractions.**

The Russell repertoire, like the Russell voice, is inexhaustible, and all the words and music are her own. Last evening she began with the habanera from "Carmen" and somehow it got out of hand and became the vocalizing of a square-dance caller. With an amiable baritone, Joseph Scandur, to help her, she put on an entire schmaltzy operetta in ten minutes. She put an end to the sweet English type of ballad by singing "I Gave My Love a Cherry" and she destroyed the Edith Piaf type of chantoosie with a sad and throaty number titled "Les Cigarettes."

Happily, Miss Russell breaks up her large part of the program by stopping singing for a bit in order to burlesque types of pianists and to deliver a very fine lecture on how to play the bagpipe.

The "little show" part of her program includes Jean Leon Destine and Yolanda Gaffne, accomplished Haitian dancers; Paul Duke, the prestidigitator who can produce more cigarets than R. J. Reynolds, and Arthur Barnett, a handsome fellow who gives a lecture on how to laugh and an imitation of a train in motion. Jane Ashlock and Arthur Harris provide the musical accompaniment on two well-disciplined pianos.

**"ANNA RUSSELL AND HER LITTLE SHOW"**

Intimate review with music and lyrics by Anna Russell; staged by Arthur Klein; lighting by Ralph Alswang; musical arrangements by Arthur Harris; presented by Eastman Boomer and Mr. Klein at the Vanderbilt Theatre, September 7, 1953; and featuring Miss Russell, Arthur Barnett, Paul Duke, Joseph Scandur, Ashlock and Harris, and Jean Leon Destine and company.

## The New York Times

September 8, 1953

### Anna Russell Burlesques Styles of Singing and Piano Playing in Her 'Little Show'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Half a little show would probably be the right size for Anna Russell. She is an energetic lady with a powerful voice and a rowdy sense of humor. In the first part of her "Little Show," which opened with loud reports at the Vanderbilt last evening, she burlesques songs of all nations at the top of her voice with double-takes and other grimaces. As a sullen, British choirboy singing "Night and Day" without aspirates, she is pretty funny; and she is also funny with an Irish folk-song about the lover who gave her golden shoes that did not fit very well.

* * *

But Miss Russell has more exuberance than variety, and the second half of her little show settles down to a test of strength and endurance. She is the victor. After she has slaughtered piano players and styles in popular songs, she is still going strong—her muscles hard, her voice resonant, her sense of humor hearty. But at least one of her customers was beaten down, overwhelmed and dazed by this time and dreaming wistfully of the lightness and dexterity of Beatrice Lillie's comic style. Miss Lillie was in the audience last evening, keeping her own counsel, too.

Although Miss Russell is superhuman, she does permit assistants. There are Jane Ashlock and Arthur Harris, duo pianists, who crash through with some spirited music, and after the fashion of duo pianists, smile at each other coquettishly after every measure. Jean Leon Destine and Yolanda Gaffne dance some of those savage Haitian numbers. Arthur Barnett catalogues laughs and also imitates a railroad train—possibly, the Canadian Pacific Railroad switched on to the New York Central system. The locomotive is not New York Central, but the train does arrive in New York.

* * *

But Paul Duke is the most professional performer on the bill. He is a magician who carries more decks of cards than a traveling salesman, picks lighted cigarettes out of the air and eats razor blades. He also has a slick blonde assistant—Doris Haley, it says here in small type. The whole act is strictly professional.

## New York Herald Tribune

September 8, 1953

THEATER

### 'Anna Russell'

By WALTER F. KERR

Monday was Labor Day, especially at the Vanderbilt. With hammer, tongs and unremitting industry, a determined and fairly desperate comedienne named Anna Russell strove mightily to convince a New York audience that it had never seen a parody of a folk singer, a flamenco dancer or a Shubert operetta before.

Miss Russell has been doing a one-woman show about the country for several years, apparently with decided success. She seems to have acquired a considerable body of fans, many of whom were present and cheering at her "Little Show" last evening, and the fact ought to be reported. It ought to be reported but not condoned.

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For Miss Russell's methods are strictly for matinees. The star is possessed of an initially agreeable personality. She has something of an ear for musical absurdity and something of an eye for irrelevant detail. When she is swallowing down the last note of "Night and Day" as arranged by Handel, or poising her fingers on an imaginary harp, or batting at a piano in the manner of a stag-party genius who plays by ear, she is briefly funny.

But the effort which goes into her full-scale burlesques is as exhausting as it is unoriginal. She spends a great deal of time casting startled looks, reproving looks, and knowing looks at her audience, as though something devastating had happened somewhere. The chatter which introduces the musical bits ranges from the mild try ("The purity of tone here will pierce your brain like a corkscrew") to the hard-working introduction of references to Kinsey and McCarthy.

And when she gets her teeth into the parodies proper, she deals in the kind of heavy-handed satire which is almost indistinguishable from the subject being satirized. Her version of an old Schubert operetta takes place "in the Schlitz Hotel in Pabst," and quite a bit of it is occupied with the comic business of nearly hitting the leading tenor in the face. Her flamenco lyric—Miss Russell writes all her own material—is of the sort in which the words "tomato," "potato," and "baloney" figure rather prominently. Her folk song presents us with the following quatrain:

He's in the foggy, foggy dew,
I'm in a dewy fog,
The way my trug love treated me
Shouldn't happen to a dog.

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Like so much of Miss Russell's material, this seems to me neither good sophisticated kidding nor good college capers. When the performer does stumble on something amusing—as in the business of that operatic blast which comes from a heroine dying of tuberculosis—she works it over four or five times for good measure, like the man who is so pleased at having told a joke that he feels he must repeat it instantly. Otherwise, Miss Russell permits herself to stick out her tongue at the audience, finish off a song with a Bronx cheer, and wind herself up for a naughty word beginning with "b" which turns out to be "baritone." There is, I'm afraid, very little genuine wit in all this, and no restraint or economy whatever. More touring is indicated.

The enterprise at the Vanderbilt is billed as a "revue," which means that when the principal entertainer is not on stage, one or another vaudeville recruit is. Jean Leon Destine and Company are interesting enough in a couple of voodoo exercises, magician Paul Duke chews up an astonishing supply of cigarettes, handkerchiefs and razor blades, and monologist Arthur Barnett has a few things to say. One of the things he has to say concerns the study of "laughology." It seems that there are 165 different kinds of laughs, very few of which I found myself using as the evening wore on.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 8, 1953

# Anna Russell Show Opens Broadway

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new Broadway season got its technical start last night when Miss Anna Russell and her Little Show opened at the Vanderbilt.

The entertainment does its best to defy classification. It got a steady stream of laughs from the premiere crowd, and has an odd kinship with night club floor shows in less elite neighborhoods.

The principal matter of interest is Miss Russell herself, who is certainly an unusual talent. She has marked up a record for herself in the past couple of seasons with sold-out concerts, one after another, at Town Hall.

Miss Russell is an extraordinary satirist of the musical world. There are many moments in her various sketches which are downright brilliant. Last night she seemed occasionally overanxious, or perhaps a little too determined to get out of the concert field and into Broadway.

The result is that you wonder how anyone with her delightful sense of humor, and gift for economical effect, can suddenly indulge in sketches which amount to nothing more than dressing up in funny hats and mugging.

She seemed to me at her very best when she played her jokes straightest. One of her top items is a takeoff on French singers. The song is sung on the sharp edge between seriousness and travesty. For seconds you are really moved. Then you roar. It scores.

As delightful is the Handel arrangement of "Night and Day" sung by a British choirboy. And her takeoff on a grand opera death scene has moments of vicious and penetrating wit.

Distinctly a credit is Miss Russell's pantomimed harp playing, and a ludicrous, but overlong bout with the bagpipes.

The star is tall and shapely, with a harp face that is mobile enough to respond to her wildest demands. Her voice is not exactly dulcet, but it has range and power, which are more important. When she tires of singing, which is seldom, she can be just as funny making fun of mannered pianists.

One gets the impression that Miss Russell has endless quantities of material.

On the current bill she is surrounded by some other entertainers, none of whom come off with any great distinction. Ashlock and Harris handle some pleasant musical backgrounds for the show, at a pair of pianos.

On the stage Jean Leon Destine does some voodoo dances, while Paul Duke offers a series of magic tricks, and Arthur Barnett imitates trains and categories laughter in much the same manner as Reginald Gardiner last season supported Beatrice Lillie. Joseph Scandur joins Miss Russell in a couple of her more elaborate parodies.

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Daily Mirror

September 8, 1953

# *First-Nighters Give Warm Welcome to Anna Russell*

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In our book, Anna Russell is a great musical satirist. She has a keen wit and an excellent voice. These are essentials for one who would kid the classics and pops. Her range is amazing. She can turn from spoofing an operatic coloratura to a nightclub chantootsie in the blink of an eye.

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**THREE YEARS** ago, Miss Russell began making annual appearances at Town Hall. We caught and loved a couple of them. They were sell-outs, with some of the smart set who waited too long to buy their tickets left out in the cold. She developed a large and loyal following. We thought she would be fine in a Broadway revue.

**Well, Eastman Boomer and Arthur Klein brought Miss Russell to the Vanderbilt Theatre Monday evening in an intimate revue and, frankly, it hurts us to report that it is disappointing. Boomer and Klein have surrounded her with talents that are at variance with her unique style. There is Jean Leon Destine's dance company. Destine is an exciting and popular Haitian artist.**

There's Paul Duke, an ingratiating and popular magician. He has mystified Kings and Presidents. He even achieved the remarkable feat of a two-year run at the Center Theatre. There's Arthur Barnett, who imitates locomotives and wacky laughs, and Joseph Scandur, a good singer. But it just doesn't all jell.

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**AS FOR MISS** Russell, at her best she's terrific. But we have a feeling that in invading Broadway she has been unwisely persuaded to lower her standards. She has eliminated several of her most hilarious and esoteric numbers, and added some that are on the pedestrian side—that smack of the corny.

**Miss Russell is tall and blonde. She reminds us just a little of Gracie Fields. But she has a scope far beyond Gracie's. She can turn on the hoke when it pleases her, and she can level when she wants to. In fact, she did on several occasions last night with telling effect. We doubt you will hear any French nitery star do "Les Cigarettes" half so well.**

In addition to that little gem, we also liked "Trink," "O Night! O Day!," "I Give My Love a Cherry," "The Bagpipes" and "The Prince of Philadelphia," a riotous impression of operetta as presented in musical circuses. "The Decline and Fall of the Popular Song" fell a little flat.

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**PERSONALLY,** we kept yearning for her sly digs at Wagnerian sopranos, modern composers and amateur singers. They are classics. But they never came. So we'll just have to hear them at home via the Columbia album: "Anna Russell Sings." Or at her next Town Hall sessions.

**A salute should go to Jane Ashlock and Arthur Harris, duo pianists, who played a swell show. They made their Steinways sound like a full orchestra.**

"Anna Russell and Her Little Show" underestimates the intelligence and taste of the Russell aficionados. In trying to compromise with Broadway, it misses its target. It isn't as clever and suave as it should be for the carriage trade. And it may be a little too sophisticated for the tired business man who wants girls, girls, girls in his musicals. It's a case of almost, but not quite.

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**IT SHOULD BE** reported, however, that the first-nighters blistered their palms applauding. They gave Miss Russell and her associates a heart-warming welcome.